

“A Man Who Had Two Sons”

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Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable:

^{11b} “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So, he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’” (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

One of Ernest Hemingway’s lesser-known works is a short story called “The Capital of the World.” It takes place in Madrid, in a bar that served food with some simple rooms upstairs. The Pension Luarca was a center of the bullfighting scene, although the matadors who stayed there were mostly washed-up has-beens. The story revolves around Paco, a strong, hard-working boy just on the cusp of manhood who waited tables at the Luarca. He was a good kid, but not all that distinctive. There were lots of Pacos in Madrid. In fact, Hemingway starts out the story by referencing an old joke about a father who came to Madrid and posted an advertisement in the local paper that said, “**Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon Tuesday; all is forgiven. Love, Papa.**” The police had to come to disperse the crowd, because at least 800 young men answered the ad!



For those of you who have not read the story, I will summarize it by simply saying it is a portrait of the world's ability to crush the human spirit. Of the three matadors living at the pension house, Hemingway writes that "one was ill and trying to conceal it;" one had been a flash-in-the-pan and never really made it; "and the third was a coward." All three had shown tremendous promise as young men; all three had been broken by the world. The sick matador's potential had been squelched by a chronic illness he could never quite beat. Initially, the flash-in-the-pan matador was a great novelty because he was so short, but it turned out that his style was kind of old fashioned, and there were other short matadors, and now he ate alone in the Luarda every night. The coward had been a phenomenon in his first season, a rare new talent in the bullfighting world... until one afternoon in the ring a bull made an unexpected move and gored the matador severely in the stomach. He eventually recovered his health, but his confidence was gone forever. Fear of the bad things that could happen to him took over every aspect of his life, and he had never taken another real risk in life. In the beginning, each matador looked out at the world as though it was his oyster, but it had not taken the world long to break the hearts of all three of them.

The same was true of the younger son in this parable of Jesus. He dreamed of a big life away from the farm. With hope and enthusiasm, he set out to chart his own course to exotic faraway places where he could live as he wanted to live, but it had not taken the world long to crush his dreams. The story of his failure, repentance, homecoming, and salvation is so compelling that we often refer to him alone when we recall the famous story of "The Prodigal Son."

But that title ignores the fact that there are other important characters in that story. There is the elder brother, whose dream also breaks apart. As the oldest male, he assumed that he would someday become the patriarch of the family when his time came. It was the law, it was his right, it was his destiny. But his younger brother usurped all of that in pursuit of his own selfish goals. To make matters worse, when he crawled back home in disgrace, his father didn't seem all that upset. To his shock, there were no apparent consequences of the younger brother's sin; in fact, his disobedience seemed to be rewarded. All of the assumptions that the elder brother had believed and lived by were falling apart. After all, he was the one who stayed... he was the one who kept working and fulfilled his duties... he was the one whose behavior should be celebrated... but once again the younger brother seemed to be stealing what was rightfully his.

And what about their poor father... harshly treated and dishonored... his once-promising young family now broken by dysfunction and shame -- one child recovering from a sinful, embarrassing past, the other child embittered, alienated, and resentful. The father could have felt all kinds of things that we would easily understand -- anger, frustration, sadness, self-pity. It would have been so easy for him to say "I told you so!" or shut his door to the son who had abandoned him. Almost miraculously, we see none of that in him -- only joy and love at the fact that his wayward son had been lost, but now is found.

There are three important players in this parable, not just one. That is why some commentators eschew the traditional name and prefer to refer to this story as "The Man

Who Had Two Sons” ...¹ Or, better yet, “The Parent Who Had Two Children” ... because in the end this story is about a family that might stay together, or might fall apart.

There is so much to talk about in this parable, but I want to focus this morning on one thing, and that is **grace**. The heart of this parable is clearly grace. That does not mean it is simple. Grace is a complicated thing. The word itself can mean so many things. Grace can be a blessing before a meal. It can describe the beauty of a dancer’s movement. It can suggest pleasing social behavior or elegant manners. To be in someone’s “good graces” means to enjoy favorable treatment. And I haven’t even started with the religious definitions of grace... as the antithesis of sin... as divine, unmerited forgiveness... as a gift of loving kindness when punishment would have been more deserved.

In this story, however, I see yet another definition of grace that embraces the concept of family connections. I would state that description as follows: **Grace is God’s commitment to remain in loving relationship with us, even when we turn our backs on God**. Grace is God’s promise to share love and joy with us, even when we act like we couldn’t care less. It is pretty obvious, but it should be said anyway, that the father in this parable represents this heavenly faith, love, hope, and commitment. In the father, we see the amazing lengths to which a loving parent will go to keep his family together, even as his two children seem bent on tearing it apart.

The younger son starts the emotional rockslide when he petitions his father to divide the family property so he could get his share immediately. In that culture, such a request was not merely irregular; it was radical, shocking, and tragically disrespectful. Just like today, distribution of a man’s property would customarily take place when the man died, not before. In rare cases, an early bequest could be granted when a son got married, but this son was not getting married. Truth be told, relational commitment was the furthest thing from his mind. So, there is really only one way to interpret his bold and callous request. By asking for his inheritance at that moment, the younger son was basically treating his father as if he were already dead. As far as the son was concerned, his father was dead to him. He didn’t care if he had to sever his relationships and leave the dead carcass of his family on the side of the road; all he wanted was the money.

The father’s response confirms that this act was, in effect, a murder. In our English translation, the son says, “*Father, give me the share of the **property** that will belong to me,*” and in response the father “*divided his **property** between them.*” In the original Greek, the son asks for his share of the “*ousias,*” a Greek word meaning “substance” or “property.” It is clear he wanted his share of the “stuff.” But it is interesting to note that what the father gives in return is not *ousias*. The Greek word used to describe the father’s gift is a different one. It is the Greek noun βίος (*bios*). True, *bios* can mean “property” or “stuff,” but the better definition of that word is “life...”² as in “biology,” “biography,” “biopsy.” The son asked his father to divide the stuff between them, but in return the father “*divided **his life** between them.*” In response to a request that must have been incredibly hurtful and heartbreaking, the father responds with a grace that says, “Whatever you need. My life is yours. If this is what is required, I will give my life for you.”

¹ See Culpepper, R. Alan “The Gospel of Luke,” *New Interpreter’s Bible Series, Vol. 9*, Nashville: Abingdon Press (1995), p. 300; and Craddock, Fred. *Luke*. Interpretation Bible Commentary Series. Louisville: John Knox Press (1990), p. 186.

² Definition of bios at <http://www.greekbible.com>, on March 11, 2010.

Later, when everything falls apart, when his life literally goes to pig filth, the younger son can do nothing but crawl home humiliated and defeated, and he carries with him the full understanding of what he had said and done in the beginning. "I am no longer worthy to be called your son," he says; "treat me like one of your hired hands." I will give it to him, at least he understands the emotional break he had caused. He rightly assumes that there is no longer a family relationship with his father and brother. Having cashed out and turned his back on them, he is no longer part of the family.

The father, however, refuses to accept the death sentence for his family. Throughout this parable, the father never stops using relational language. "This son of mine was dead," he says, "but he is alive again!" "This son of mine," he says. The father is not just ready to take the son in and give him some work. He intends to welcome the son back into the position he had renounced. The prodigal had never stopped being his father's son.

The father also encourages his eldest son to join him in this amazing act of grace. The older one is understandably bitter and confused. But the father does not give up on keeping the whole family intact. "Son," he says to the elder boy, "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." Here again, the Greek helps to reveal the relational work the father is doing. The normal word for "son" is υἱός (*huios*), and the father uses that word throughout the story... until the very end, when the father draws the elder son close and uses a more intimate and tender word, τέκνον (*teknon*). You can imagine all the ways that a father can address a son. "Son, why haven't you finished mowing that lawn?" "Son, you better watch that tone with me." "Son, don't be so angry with your brother."

But that is not what happens here. Even as the elder son festers with resentment, perhaps as he wonders why, after all he has done, his father seems to love his selfish brother more than him, his father pulls him close and addresses him, "My child." "My child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." And then he makes it clear that the family was not broken – that the bonds should never be broken. "This brother of yours was dead," he says. "Your brother was dead, but he has come back to us... he has come back to life... he was lost but he has been found. Join me in my joy. He is still my son. He is still your brother. Join me in my joy."

I think there is a reason that this parable is one of the most treasured in all of scripture. I think we hold so tightly to it because we all know how the world can break our hearts and how a dream can be crushed. We have all experienced relationships that fall apart... how slights and insults can cut deep and resentments can build... until we are ready to just walk away. Some of us might be ill and trying to conceal it. Others might feel like flashes-in-the pan, like something showed so much promise in the beginning but we just couldn't make it work. Some of us may even feel a bit cowardly... something happened once that hurt us deeply, and we feared that pain so much we became reluctant to try again.

A few weeks ago, Stephanie and I went to Rye Neck High School to see their spring musical. It is amazing what young people can do, how talented they already are. One of the highlights of that show was Fantine's haunting aria that speaks right to the heart of what I am talking about...

*I dreamed a dream in times gone by, When hope was high and life worth living
I dreamed, that love would never die, I dreamed that God would be forgiving
Then I was young and unafraid, And dreams were made and used and wasted
There was no ransom to be paid, No song unsung, no wine untasted*

*But the tigers come at night, With their voices soft as thunder
As they tear your hope apart, As they turn your dream to shame...
I had a dream my life would be, So different from this hell I'm living
So different now from what it seemed, Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.³*

This is why “The Parent Who Had Two Children” is a parable that lives so powerfully in our hearts. We cling to it because we sense that, in a world that stands ready to inflict pain and tear us apart, we need something... someone... who can keep the family together... something, someone, who can hold onto faith, hope, and love with such tenacity and commitment that it can bring all the broken pieces back together and give us the happy ending we could never arrange for ourselves. Grace is God’s commitment to remain in loving relationship with us, even when we turn our backs on God... even when we act like we couldn’t care less.

For the record, that joke Hemingway used at the beginning of his story? That was no joke. And Hemingway knew it wasn’t a joke. In fact, in a city the size of Madrid, 800 children who desperately needed a parent’s love... who deep down wanted to heal what had been broken for so long... I think that number is way too low. Sure, there are a lot of Pacos in that city... just like there are a lot of broken dreams in the world. But who wouldn’t love to get a note like that?

Whose broken heart wouldn’t love to get a message that, no matter what had happened, we are always welcome at home?

Who wouldn’t celebrate the fact that, in the kingdom of God, grace is always greater than sin?

Whose spirit wouldn’t leap to read in the paper “Paco... son of mine... my child... what is mine is yours... my life is yours... meet me at the Hotel Montana noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Love, Papa.”

Amen.

³ Schönberg, Claude-Michel. “Les Misérables: a Musical.” London: Milwaukee, WI: Alain Boublil Music; Exclusively distributed by H. Leonard, 1998.